The Challenge of Ethics

Calvin and Hobbes

Whenever I need to do some serious thinking, I go for a walk in the woods.

There are always a million distractions out here.

As far as I'm concerned, the ends justify the means.

I don't believe in ethics any more.

Get what you can while the getting's good — that's what I say. Right makes right? The winners write the history books!

It's a dog-eat-dog world, so I'll do whatever I have to, and let others argue about whether it's "right" or not.

Hey!

Why'd you do that?!

You were in my way. Now you're not, the ends justify the means.

I didn't mean for everyone, you dolt!

Ahh...
Beyond Applied Ethics...

- Applied ethics is popular because it is easy to see the application
- Applied ethics is unpopular because it is difficult to make progress—those who are cynical will say that it is just listing a bunch of competing intuitions with no real direction
- *Normative* ethics attempts to give systematic answers to how we should generally decide what to do.
- In normative ethics, we abstract from a lot of individual cases what it is in general that makes something right or wrong, then we take that abstracted principle back down with us into particularly difficult cases
- Normative ethics can be seen as answering the general question, what should we do?
While evaluating normative ethical systems, a natural second question arises—Why be ethical?

On the one hand this is nonsensical—asking why I should do what I should do doesn’t make any more sense than asking blue things are blue or why basketball games use basketballs?

The question can be rephrased in various ways to try to bring out what is actually be asked about.
The Challenge to Ethics

One way to think about the challenge of “Why be Ethical” is in terms of two other positions in ethics:

▶ **Egoism** claims that the right thing to do is whatever is best for oneself; each individual should be entirely self-centered.

▶ **Nihilism** claims that there is no such thing as right or wrong. There are personal preferences, and that is it. I may not prefer murder, and if a bunch of us with that preference get together we may make a solemn promise to prevent murder (a law), but there is nothing correct or incorrect about our preferences; they are just the preferences we happen to have. For nihilism, it is not even right or wrong to do what benefits yourself, it is just stuff you do.

▶ Some nihilists will make various claims to make sense of our moral language; we can think of “charity is good” as meaning “I like charity” and “bullying is bad” as “I dislike bullying.”
The Challenge to Ethics

*Egoism*—one should do whatever is best for oneself
*Nihilism*—there is no such thing as right or wrong.

- While different in theory, Egoism and Nihilism are similar in practice—do what you want!
- One way to think about the challenge to ethics is, what could you say to the egoist/nihilist who does not want to follow your ethical system?
- What fact about the world has the egoist/nihilist missed?
Glaucon’s Challenge

- Glaucon offers Socrates a different way to think about the challenge to ethics.
- Glaucon distinguishes three types of “good things”
  1. Desirable in itself (joy/happiness)
  2. Desirable in itself and for its consequences (thinking, health)
  3. Desirable for its consequences (exercise, root canals, work)
- Socrates (and Plato) claim that justice (or goodness) falls within the first two kinds, but Glaucon argues it is the third kind.
- His proof is the Ring of Gyges example.
The Ring of Gyges

- According Glaucon, we only agree to be just because of a consequences.
- Since we would do not want other people being unjust towards us, we form societies which collectively agree to protect each other from injustice.
- In so doing, we give up something we would like to be able to do, namely take advantage of people, in order to avoid the worse consequence of being taken advantage of.
- Since we would all act differently given the ability to get away with it, it must be that we merely act moral in order to get the good benefits of society, but that we actually think it would be better to be immoral.
- Many people say the main reason not to do bad things is that you could get caught and get in legal trouble, which is precisely what is so brilliant about Plato’s Ring of Gyges example—it asks what you would do if you knew you would get away with it. The Ring of Gyges is supposed to remove the legal answer from the equation so we can just look at the ethics.
Why Live Ethically?

- According to Glaucon, there is no reason to live ethically other than potential consequences. Ethics is necessary, but not desirable. Is he right?
- One reason to think he must be wrong is that this seems drastically inconsistent with the way we want to tell people they should do things.
- There is also the fear that if someone doesn’t fear the consequences or is good enough to not get caught, then would there really be no reason they shouldn’t rape and murder you?
- If an egoist/nihilist were given the ring of Gyges, why shouldn’t they do whatever their impulses tell them to do?
- More realistically, why shouldn’t you just go out partying every night of the week, have sex with anything that moves, cheat your way through college, and use your (or your family’s) connections to land a high paying job after college?
- An ethical system will be an attempt to answer how we should live, and why we should live that way.